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Loom and Spindle: Or Life Among the Early Mill Girls, with a Sketch of "The Lowell Offering" and Some of its Contributors.
By HARRIET H. ROBINSON. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1898. 12mo, pp. vii + 216.

MRS. ROBINSON writes of a working life in which she shared, and which has no counterpart in the workshops and factories of today. Born Harriet Hanson in Boston, 1825, she became a part of this life at the early age of seven years. Her widowed mother, then settled in Lowell, "kept forty boarders, most of them men mill-hands, and did all her housework with what help her children could give her between schools; for we all, even the baby three years old, were kept at school." When Harriet was about ten years old she went into the cotton factory, as a "doffer," and remained at work there until her marriage. Fifty years after its date she holds with pride her "honorable discharge" from mill-work, dated July 25, 1848. In that year she became the wife of William S. Robinson, well known in the newspaper world of thirty years ago as "Warrington."

Mrs. Robinson described the Lowell of sixty years ago as a city and a people living in almost Arcadian simplicity, at a time which, in view of the greatly changed conditions of factory labor, may well be called a lost Eden for that portion of our working men and working women.

She considers the Lowell system as unique among the factory systems of the world, in that it contemplated "corporations should have souls, and should exercise a paternal influence over the lives of their operatives." Ownership and control of boarding houses by the corporations was a part of this paternal system, with a good deal of supervision of the outgoings and incomings of boarders. To encourage girls to board in these houses the companies for a long time paid 25 cents of the \$1.25 per week, which was the charge for board. Another attempt at regulating the lives of employees of the Merrimack corporation was, that "every operative was obliged to pay 37 $\frac{1}{2}$ cents per month to the support of the St. Anne [Episcopal] church. But this was not in the contracts, the operatives objected, and the practice was discontinued." The following regulation was in force at the time of which Mrs. Robinson writes: "On entering the mill each one was obliged to sign a paper, which required her to attend regularly some place of public worship."

Girls of the type which filled the Lowell factories in that day

could be trusted to take care of themselves, however, and Mrs. Robinson has portrayed the type very well. We recognize it as she calls the roll of remembered names: "Samantha, Tryphema, Plumy, Kezia, Aseneth, Elgardy, Leafy, Ruhamah, Lovey, Almaretta, Sarepta, and Florilla." No less are these recognized as daughters of the farm by the multitudinous bandboxes, the "trunks covered with skins of calves spotted in dun and white," by the homespun dress, the homely sunbonnet. To weave wedding outfits of clothes and household goods for themselves these forehanded maidens came to the town of looms; or as faithful and proud sisters whose wages should go to help through Dartmouth or Harvard the "gifted" brother.

They came eagerly from the somewhat starved life of the farm; they enjoyed soberly but fully the blessings of the town. They attended meetings where "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" was chanted; of lectures secular and religious there was no dearth. They followed fads in their food, and refused to follow Mrs. Amelia Bloomer in dress reform. They dabbled in phrenology, and were affrighted by mesmerism. They were honored by visitors of distinction, including Charles Dickens and President Jackson. For the latter they walked in procession, attired in white dresses and bearing green parasols; and of them he swore, "by the Eternal," that they were "very pretty women." Above all things they read books and discussed their souls. "The fame of the circulating libraries," Mrs. Robinson says, "drew them and kept them there when no other inducement would have been sufficient," and she tells of one household where the eleven girl boarders took in fifteen newspapers and periodicals regularly. "They were not allowed to read books openly," Mrs. Robinson says, "in the mills; but they brought their favorite pieces of poetry, hymns, extracts, and pasted them up over their looms or frames, so that they could glance at them and commit them to memory." These clippings, pasted on mill windows, Lucy Larcom, once a Lowell mill girl, wrote of at a later day as "window gems."

The deep, pervading religious sentiment of the day found expression. "We had frequent discussions among ourselves," Mrs. Robinson says, "on the different texts of the Bible, and debated such questions as: Is it a sin to read novels? Is it right to read secular books on Sundays? Is it wicked to play cards or checkers?" And again she says: "Discussions and controversies were rife, and whether there was a hell or not was the chief topic of the day among factory

people." Undoubtedly the last question was generally answered in the affirmative, and one of the most interesting recitals of the book is the writer's own experiences in "joining" an Orthodox church, and then suffering excommunication.

There was no hurry in the working life then. "I have known a girl to sit idle twenty or thirty minutes at a time," Mrs. Robinson testifies. There was nothing depressing in the life. "The rights of the mill girl were secure," she continues. She was not subjected to extortion, was paid in full, not overworked, treated with consideration by her employer, cordially received into the social life and religious circles of the little city. With this highly inspiriting environment for her temporary employment, there waited in the background the comfortable home. In the first serious strike of the cotton operatives in this country, in Lowell, October 1836, Mrs. Robinson sees the beginning of the end of this ideal life of labor :

The mills were shut down, and the girls went in procession from their several corporations to the grove on Chapel Hill, and listened to 'incendiary' speeches from early labor reformers. One of the girls stood on a pump, and gave vent to the feelings of her companions in a neat speech, declaring that it was their duty to resist all attempts at cutting down their wages. This was the first time a woman had spoken in public in Lowell.

Cutting down their wages was not their only grievance, nor the only cause of the strike. Hitherto the corporations had paid twenty-five cents a week toward the board of each operative, and now it was their purpose to have the girls pay this sum ; and this, in addition to the cut in wages, would make a difference of at least a dollar a week. It was estimated that as many as twelve or fifteen hundred girls turned out, and walked in procession through the streets. They had neither flags nor music, but sung songs.

It is hardly necessary to say that as far as results were concerned the strike did no good. The dissatisfaction of the operatives subsided, or burned itself out ; and though the authorities did not accede to their demands the majority returned to their work ; and the corporations went on cutting down wages. And after a time, as the wages became more and more reduced, the best portion of the girls left and went to their own homes, or to the other employments that were fast opening to women, until there were very few of the old guard left ; and thus the status of the factory population of New England gradually became what we know it to be today.

The particular hardship for children in mill life, sixty years ago, was too early rising, necessitated by the long hours of work. Even the little doffers were on duty fourteen hours a day. "It has taken me nearly

a life time," Mrs. Robinson says, "to make up the sleep I lost at that early age." But this long day was not all a day of work, as she explains:

I can see myself now racing down the alley between the spinning frames, carrying in front of me a bobbin box bigger than I was. These mites had to be very swift in their movements, not to keep the spinning frames stopped long ; and they worked only about fifteen minutes in every hour. The rest of the time was their own, and when the overseer was kind they were allowed to read, knit, or even go out in the yard to play. Some of us learned to embroider in crewel, and I still have a lamb worked on cloth, a relic of those early days. When not doffing we were often allowed to go home for a time, and thus were enabled to help our mothers in their housework.

It need not be pointed out that no such play-with-work could be tolerated in the highly-speeded factory of today. We pronounce conditions of labor for children greatly improved by the reduction of their hours of labor ; but it may well be questioned whether this reduction, accompanied as it is by increased stress of application, is the gain we have measured it to be. As to wages then and now : The little doffer received \$2 per week sixty years ago ; the little victim of the sweatshop today is glad to get fifty or seventy-five cents for her long week of toil.

Mrs. Robinson devotes three chapters to *The Lowell Offering* and its contributors, taking these very seriously, quoting praises that to a critical ear sound both patronizing and equivocal. She does indeed recognize as a "back-handed compliment" the citation from Chambers's *Edinburgh Journal*, "Respectable efforts for females of any rank of life," but this is not much worse than the rest. As a matter of fact, this "Repository of Original Articles written by Factory Girls" was not literature, and was necessarily praised, if praised at all, on other grounds than merit.

Undoubtedly Mrs. Robinson has remembered and presented the bright side of mill life sixty years ago, but she has not overstated this side nor avoided mention of its darkening phases. Her reminiscences are simple and direct ; they do not create, they reveal. The reason that this happy and wholesome life was possible she sums up in one sentence : "Help was too valuable to be ill-treated." That she does not comprehend the full meaning of this saying is shown in the final chapter of the book, which she devotes to a plea "in behalf of the cotton operatives of today ;" a plea based on a total misconception of the iron economic laws which regulate today's factory employment.

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